

## **The Weapons Trail in India's Northeast**

**Shri EN Rammohan, IPS (Retd)\***

India's first insurgency broke out in India's Northeast in the Naga Hills district of Assam in the mid fifties of the last century. The Nagas a Mongoloid group of thirty odd tribes lived in the Naga Hills district of Assam and in four hill districts of Manipur. They told the British before they left India that they did not wish to be governed by the 'plains people' of Assam when India would be given Independence. The British had orders issued to treat the Naga Hills and other tribal areas as excluded areas. This did not satisfy the Nagas who had formed a Naga National Council. The first manifestation of their division from India came on 14 August 1947, a day before the Independence of India, when Angami Zapu Phizo, the head of the Naga National Council assembled his followers and the people of Kohima and declared the Independence of Nagaland. On the next day, 15 August 1947, when the Indian Independence Day was to be celebrated, the Naga people boycotted the function where the Indian flag was hoisted.

### **First Weapons from Pakistan Army**

Angami Zapu Phizo, the Naga leader first began to organise his army by collecting weapons that the British Army had left behind in several dumps in the Naga Hills – after the Japanese were defeated at the Battle of Kohima. He had raised a unit that he labelled the Naga Home Guard. The weapons they recovered from the caches left by the British Army were however not of much use. They were mostly weapons of Second World War vintage. The Naga Underground that had been formed got a big lift when Angami Zapu Phizo managed to slip into East Pakistan and met the Pakistan Army. The Pakistan Army agreed to help the Naga rebels and gave them weapons and trained them. The Naga Underground Army infiltrated back into India and re-entered the Naga Hills in 1955-56. The weapons were self loading rifles, light machine guns and mortars, all imported by the Pakistan Army from European countries. By the 1960's, the Pakistan Army began training the leading Naga underground personnel in the use of plastic explosives. The Northeast Frontier Railway had a single metre gauge railway line going from Lumding to Dibrugarh on which the Assam Mail, the only Mail train from New Delhi to Dibrugarh, used to run. This single line ran parallel to the Naga Hills border from Furkating to Amguri. Of this stretch, the Assam Naga Hills border was thickly wooded. Self styled General Kaito Sema and his band of guerillas who had gone to East Pakistan for training was taught to use plastic explosives on the railway track. From 1965-66, SS Kaito Sema and his guerilla band set off a series of explosions on the railway track between Titabarh and Mariani stations of the Northeast Frontier Railway line, derailing the Assam Mail several times.

### **First Weapons from China**

As the Naga insurgency progressed, Angami Zapu Phizo reached London from East Pakistan. Making London his base, Phizo developed a relationship with the Baptist Church of the United States. He got their sympathy, but could not manage to get any weapons for his underground army. His Kilonisers (ministers) back in the Naga Hills decided to send a group from the underground army to China. The first group crossed the eastern borders of the Naga Hills, traversed northern Burma with the help of the Burmese Nagas and crossed over into China from the Kachin area of Burma. The Chinese after some discussion agreed to help and the group, after a good spell of training, marched back with a collection of Chinese weapons from their ordnance factories. The Indian Army had, by then, been inducted in the Naga Hills. The China returned group of Naga hostiles gave the Indian Army a tough fight in several encounters. Meanwhile the Indian Intelligence agencies got a measure of success by splitting a faction from the Naga underground army by playing on inter-tribal rivalries. This finally led to the signing of a peace agreement. The Naga underground was split and one faction signed the peace agreement. The leaders of the second faction were away on the long trek to China through Burma. The two leaders who took the second group of the Naga underground army to China were Thuingaleng Muivah, a Thangkhu Naga, and Isaac Swu a Sema Naga. They were just crossing over from Burma into the Naga Hills when they heard about the peace agreement with the Naga underground. They strongly objected. Their attempt at reconciliation did not work out. After trying for some time Muivah and Swu formed the Nationalist Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) in league with SS Kaphlang a Hemi Naga from Burma, who had helped Muivah and Isaac Swu on their trek to China and back.

It was shortly after this that the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), an insurgent group, was formed in 1979. But it was activated in 1983, after the horrendous election that was forced on the Assamese people. This group went to Dimapur and met Thenguilang Muivah and Isaac Swu, the leaders of the NSCN, and asked for help. The two leaders warmly welcomed the ULFA leaders and guided them to have a civil and an army wing. They took the ULFA leaders to the Kachin Independent Organisation (KIO) in eastern Burma, who were having problems with the Burmese government and asked the KIO to help the ULFA by selling them weapons and training them in guerilla warfare. The KIO agreed and a stream of ULFA boys began their long trek from Kanubari tea estate near Sonari in upper Assam, to Longwa on the trijunction of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Burma and then through northern Burma to Kachin country. The training was hard and brutal and the relatively soft Assamese boys came back hard, tough and battle hardened. The weapons given by the KIO were however not very good. They were mostly weapons of the Burmese Army seized by the Kachin fighters. It was at this stage that Paresh Barua the ULFA Commander went to China and asked the Chinese for help. At that time the Chinese refused to sell arms to the ULFA. The ULFA and NSCN leaders then decided to approach Bangladesh and the Pakistan embassy in Dacca to plead for supply of arms. This was based on the case of arms that the Pakistan Army had supplied to the old Naga underground army in 1955.

### **Acquisition of Arms Financed by Pakistan, Purchased from Chinese Arms Companies**

A team of ten ULFA boys led by Munin Nabis was sent to Bangladesh, sometime in 1991 to first contact the Bangladesh Director General & Field Intelligence (DGFI) and then the Pakistan embassy and the ISI. This move led to a bonanza for the NSCN and the ULFA. Shortly after the first batch was trained in the camp of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar in Khost the team returned to Bangladesh. Here they had a quarrel with Paresh Barua, the commander of ULFA and they fled to Assam and surrendered to the Assam Police. They informed them of a meeting that was held in Sayeman hotel in Cox's

bazaar in Bangladesh in which the NSCN and ULFA leaders took part with the Pakistan ISI and the DGFI of Bangladesh. Pakistan promised to supply arms worth one million dollars for the NSCN IM (Isaac Muivah) and the ULFA. These weapons were to be purchased through arms dealers in Bangkok and Manila who would arrange to buy them from the Chinese Government's ordnance companies. They would also arrange to send the weapons by ships from North Korea to the sea off Cox's Bazaar where they would be loaded on local hired trawlers and brought to Cox's Bazaar. Here the consignments would be off loaded and carried by groups of NSCN, ULFA men overland via Alikadam, south of the Mizoram border to the Tiddim road and then into Churachandpur, then north via Kupum to the NSCN Camp in Benin, Tamenglong and then to Hebron near Dimapur a large camp of the NSCN IM. Shortly thereafter, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, and the Peoples Liberation Army were also given money by the Pakistan ISI to purchase weapons through the same channels and route.

Some months after reports of the ULFA team's return to India from Pakistan and Bangladesh, and information about the meeting in Cox's Bazaar between the ULFA and NSCN IM leaders was received, the DIG of Mizoram confirmed that about 250 armed Naga young men were trekking south just across the eastern border of Mizoram. They would sometime move into Mizoram, and enter a border village; to purchase a pig, prepare and have their lunch and then resume their march. The column was sighted by the BSF post at Parva, the tri-junction between Mizoram, Burma and Bangladesh heading towards Bandarban, a small bazaar in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. A few days later, ten Naga boys surrendered at the BSF camp at Parva. They narrated that they were among 250 NSCN IM men who were going to Cox's Bazaar to get weapons that had been landed there! They were airlifted to Massimpur. The information obtained from the ten ULFA boys, who had gone to Bangladesh, Pakistan and returned to India and surrendered to the Assam Police, was now confirmed. Weapons had been purchased and brought by ship and coastal steamer, and unloaded at Cox's Bazaar. From there the NSCN boys, who were seen marching by the Mizoram Police, had collected them and were now marching back. A few days later, the DIG Mizoram reported that the long line of Nagas seen going West were now marching back, but now each boy was carrying two weapons!

Regrettably, the Central Government took no action, though they had the information of the NSCN group heading for the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh. It was only in 1995, that the Central Government managed to contact the Burmese Government and staged an ambush across the border in Burma south of Mizoram by a combined group of the Indian Army and the Burmese Army. Shortly after the ambush was sprung, the combined group of the ULFA, the NSCN IM and the PLA was taken by surprise. Fifty eight of the combined cadres were killed and as many weapons recovered. The rest of the group scattered into the jungles. Unfortunately at about this time, the Indian Government announced an award for Aung San Su Kyi, the Burmese Democratic Party leader who was under house arrest. The Burmese Military Government then asked the Burmese Army contingent to withdraw. As a result the Indian Army contingent could not pursue the cadres of the insurgent groups who had scattered in the jungles and had to withdraw to India. Most probably, some more consignments were brought by this route in 1992, 1993 and 1994. This could not be confirmed.

### **Purchase of Arms from Chinese Arms Companies by ULFA through Bhutan**

Meanwhile, the ULFA and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) had shifted its military and civil HQs to Bhutan. Relations between the local government officials of Bhutan, the ULFA and the NDFB were very good. The ULFA and the NDFB were helping the local officials to keep the Nepalese who had been pushed out of Bhutan from infiltrating back to Bhutan. Also, they were buying everything for their cadres through the local officials. Obviously there was very good economic benefit to the Bhutan officials. By this time Paresh Barua the commander of the ULFA had managed to establish contact with arms dealers in Bangkok and Manila. He managed to persuade some officials of the Defence Ministry of Bhutan to sign indents for AK rifles and RPD 7.62 Light Machine Guns and ammunition as if the weapons were being procured for the Bhutan Government. It is established from interrogation of ULFA cadres that at least two consignment of weapons indented through the Bhutan Government defence officials were collected at the Bhutan border by the ULFA. On one occasion Paresh Barua had himself gone to the Bhutan-China border to collect the consignment.<sup>1</sup>

### **All Further Purchases by Insurgent Groups of Northeast through Arms Dealers from Chinese Arms Companies**

After the ambush by the Indian Army and the Burmese Army south of Mizoram, there was a lull. The NSCN IM now shifted the route. They first established an office in Aizawl. The next consignment that the NSCN IM brought was again purchased through arms dealers in Bangkok or Manila. It is not known which defence official of an unknown country was made to sign the indent form? It is known from reliable sources now that the Indian currency was converted to US dollars in Bangladesh and then paid to the NSCN IM dealer in Bangkok or Manila. The weapons were to be brought by a North Korean ship that would trans-ship the weapons to a coastal steamer, which would then land at Cox's Bazaar. The coastal steamer also dropped anchor a little away from the shore at Cox's Bazaar and the weapons were brought by boat. After landing they were taken by boat to the shore and then collected by the NSCN IM boys and taken overland to Bandarban, a transit camp established by them. From here instead of going east via Parva, they turned North and after reaching Kagrachari, they slipped into the Longai valley of Mizoram between two border out posts of the BSF at Amchurimukh and Tuipuibari. Going a little further, they hit the junction of the road coming from the Tripura National Highway to Kanthlang BOP via Vangmun. From Kanthlang this road crosses into the Longai valley of Mizoram and proceeds to join the Aizawal-Silchar highway. When the NSCN IM foot patrol carrying the weapons delivered at Cox's Bazaar reached the point where the road from Kanthlang descends into the Longai valley, NSCN IM vehicles from their camp in Aizawl, were waiting. The weapons were loaded into these vehicles and taken via Silchar, Jiribam, Khonsang, and Tamenglong to Benin, the big NSCN IM camp North of Tamenglong.

I was Adviser to the Governor of Manipur in 2001-2002 and managed to cultivate a source who told me that the NSCN IM had opened a camp in Aizawl. I asked the Intelligence Bureau about this and they flatly denied that the NSCN IM had opened a camp at Aizawl. Then in end 2001 a group of NSCN IM boys were seen marching to Bandarban. They

were sighted by the BSF post at Parva. A few days after the sighting, five NSCN IM cadres came running from Bandarban side and sought shelter in the BSF post at Parva. They were quickly interrogated and airlifted to Massimpur by helicopter. On interrogation all the five revealed that they were tired by the privations of the long march from Benin south to the Manipur border and thence through Burma to the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and decided to run away from the NSCN IM camp at Bandarban back to Nagaland. They were chased and so took refuge with the BSF at Parva. They also said that after the ambush East of Parva in 1995, the NSCN IM had changed their route to the new axis via Kanthlang. Since then they had established the camp in Aizawl and had always carried the weapons brought North from Kagrachari to near Kanthlang, loaded it in vehicles of the NSCN IM based in Aizawl and taken them by road via Silchar, Jiribam, Khonsang, Tamenglong to Benin.

What is inexplicable in this is: Why the Intelligence Bureau was denying the establishment of the NSCN IM camp in Aizawl? My good friend Subhir Bhowmik, the BBC correspondent at Kolkata told me that he had been taken to their camp at Aizawl well before 2001. Obviously the IB then also knew about the transit of arms by this route! The most interesting factor about the smuggling in of arms in the winter of 2000, and of 2001, is that the NSCN IM had signed a truce with the Government of India (GOI) in 1997 and talks were being held regularly between an interlocutor appointed by the Indian Government and the leadership of the NSCN IM. This bringing in of arms was clearly a violation of the ground rules of the ceasefire agreement signed by the GOI and the leadership of the NSCN IM.

That the NSCN IM changed the route of bringing weapons is confirmed by another incident. I was the Director General BSF in 1999, when I received a signal stating that Assam Rifles had ambushed an NSCN IM party in the Longai valley; eight NSCN IM cadres were killed and one seriously injured was in the hospital at Agartala. I was curious to know what the NSCN IM was doing in the Longai valley, therefore, I went immediately to Agartala to get a copy of the interrogation report of the injured NSCN IM cadre. I met Brigadier Panwar who was commanding the Assam Rifles brigade in Agartala and found that a company of Assam Rifles was deployed in the Longai valley to protect the Brus who were being attacked by the Mizos in Mizoram and were trying to flee to Tripura. I found out that a villager came to the place where a company of Assam Rifles was billeted in the Longai valley and informed them that a group of armed tribals were camping South of their location in the Longai valley. A patrol of the Assam Rifles was sent to investigate and they stumbled on the camp of the group who were resting. There was an exchange of fire and eight of the group were killed and one was seriously injured. Nine weapons were captured. The rest of the group managed to escape. Brigadier Panwar then told me that a couple of days later a group of NSCN IM men from Dimapur came to their HQs and protested that there was a ceasefire on between the Government and the NSCN IM; hence, the weapons ought to be returned to them!

Obviously this group were NSCN IM cadres who had gone via Parva to Cox's Bazaar to collect weapons and were returning from Bandarban via Khagrachari, and had slipped into the Longai valley by crossing between Amchurimukh and Tuipuibari BOPs of the BSF and were marching towards the pick-up point near Kanthlang. They were taking rest when the Assam Rifles patrol surprised them.

By 2004-5, it was learnt from reliable contacts from among the insurgents that several insurgent groups from the Northeast, particularly from Manipur, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) and the United National Liberation Front (UNLF), the NSCN IM and the NDFB had been using Bangladesh to convert the cash collected from extortion into dollars. This was then taken to two Southeast Asian capitals and made deals with arms dealers in Bangkok and Manila. They had established contacts with a couple of arms manufacturers of China based in Yunnan. Obviously these illegal arms dealers must have had contacts with some countries to get the arms indents prepared.<sup>2</sup> In all the cases that we were able to collect information from; sources among the insurgent groups in the Northeast (the NSCN IM, PLA, UNLF, NDFB or ULFA), the arms dealers in Bangkok and Manila had arranged the Indent to be signed by a defence ministry official and then placed the indent with the Chinese arms factory in Yunnan, a ship was engaged that flew the North Korean flag to get the arms loaded and transported to the high seas off Cox's Bazaar. It is not difficult to presume that the country that signed the Indent for the weapons was also North Korea. The North Korean Ship would anchor on the high seas off Cox's Bazaar and the arms would be transferred to a coastal steamer which would then ferry the weapons to the shore. From the shore, the cadres of the insurgent groups would carry the weapons through the transit camps of the NSCN IM set-up enroute into India.

The UNLF probably took their weapons via the Chittagong Hill Tract directly through Burma to Churachandpur via Phaisanjang to their hideouts South of Sajik Tampak in South Chandel district. It was only on one occasion that Paresh Barua got the ship to unload the weapons in Chittagong port. This was in April 2004. While he was present and seeing to the unloading of the weapons in Chittagong port, the local police was tipped off and all the weapons were seized.

The list of weapons seized was impressive and included the following : -

- (a) T-56-1 Sub Machine Guns - 690
- (b) 7.62 mm T-56-2 SMGs - 600
- (c) 40 mm T69 Rocket Launchers
- (d) 40 mm Rockets - 840
- (e) 9mm Semi Automatic Rifles - 400
- (f) Launching Grenades - 2000
- (g) Hand Grenades - 25,000
- (h) SMG Magazines - 6392

- (j) SMG Cartridges – 7,00,000
- (k) 7.62 Rifle Ammunition – 7, 39,680
- (l) Cartridges of other assorted weapons – 4, 00,000.

The immediate inference is that this purchase could only have been made from an arms factory and obviously the indent must have been signed by some country. Could this not be North Korea? Since it was Paresh Barua, the self styled commander of the ULFA who was personally seeing to the unloading on the docks of Chittagong harbour, the weapons must have been meant for the ULFA in Assam. Also, Paresh Barua must have had patrons in the then Bangladesh Government at a very high level. It was the Indian Intelligence who tipped off someone in a high position and also not in league with the then party in power!

## Conclusion

Presently, Paresh Barua and a group of his cadres are in the Kachin Area of Burma. They have access to the arms dealers in Manila and Bangkok. The channel of purchasing arms from the Chinese arms factories in Yunnan is still open. The Assam insurgent group is alive in the eastern region of Assam, but is lying low. In Manipur, the PLA and the UNLF are intact and quite active with a good following. The NSCN IM and the NSCN K have morphed into three groups, thus weakening the NSCN IM. With the arrest of Angelous Shimray of the NSCN IM and Rajkumar Meghen of the UNLF weapon procurement by these two groups is probably on hold. As far as the PLA of Manipur is concerned, they are quite active. Their cadres are known to be training the Maoist cadres in Jharkand. Their line with the Maoists in Nepal is also active. Though the Government of Bangladesh is against any kind of relationship with the Northeast militant groups, their financial market is open to purchase of dollars.

It is for the GOI to seize this chance and see that development money is grounded in the rural areas of Nagaland and Manipur. I have seen the ground conditions in these two states and written about it in several papers on the Northeast. What is urgently required is to construct good roads to connect all villages to the towns, develop drinking water supply system, improve horticulture in all rural areas, and allow educational institutions to set up schools in the interior areas. As the village economy improves, and good schooling reaches the interior villages, there will be a transformation in the outlook of the youth. As economic opportunities open up with better education, joining insurgent groups will become a lesser option.

## Endnotes

1. Interrogation report of ULFA cadre.
2. Information collected from sources from the Northeast.

**\*Shri EN Rammohan, IPS (Retd)** is a 1965 Batch Assam Cadre IPS Officer. During his tenure as IG CRPF, in early 1990's, he acquired first hand knowledge about the Indian States bordering Bangladesh. He retired as Director General of the BSF in Nov 2000. Post retirement he was Adviser to the Governor of Manipur.

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